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SUBJECT: MUSLIM POLITICS OF KERALA: EMERGING HARDLINERS A CAUSE OF CONCERN

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Kerala's widely reported sympathy for the convicted Saddam Hussein is a pointer to the direction of Islamic politics in this south Indian state where 24% of the population is Sunni Muslim. Driven by anti-Iraq war sentiments and leftist politics, Kerala's Muslim population strongly opposes U.S. policies in the Muslim world. Although the mainstream religious and political groups discourage violence, a few newer organizations have attracted security agencies' attention due to their militant tendencies and suspect fund sources. Since U.S. Mission programs in North Kerala might attract protest demonstrations, we recommend close coordination with state police before organizing public events. END SUMMARY

WHERE SADDAM HUSSEIN IS A HERO

12. (SBU) Perhaps no other Indian state has more Saddam Hussein fans than Kerala. Local Malayalam language press, particularly the Muslim newspapers, reacted strongly to the recent Saddam verdict. Most parts of Kerala, including a beach and a junction named after Saddam, witnessed angry demonstrations. Even the moderate and soft-spoken President of the Indian Union Muslim League, Panakkad Shihab Ali Thangal, did not mince words while condemning the "inhumane verdict that blatantly violated international justice systems." The Economic Times newspaper noted in an article titled "For Kerala Parties, Saddam is Their Own:" "If Saddam Hussein were to evade the noose and decide to start afresh in politics, Kerala looks to be a good option for him. Going by the public reaction here, he seems to be as much a hero in Tirur or Thiruvananthapuram as he is in Tikrit."

MUSLIM DEMOGRAPHICS: HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT AND MIGRATION

13. (SBU) The only religious community experiencing growth in Kerala, Muslims now form 24.7% of the state population. The large majority of Muslims of North Kerala are known as "Mappilas" (also, "Moplahs"), who include the descendants of Arabs who had trade and marital links with the Malabar Coast as far back as the 8th Century. Kerala's Muslim population is concentrated in the northern districts, particularly Malappuram, Palakkad, Kozhikode, Kannur, Wynad and Kasergode. Mostly subsistence farmers, the Muslims lag behind the state averages in socio-economic indicators such as general and women's literacy, higher education and employment. According to census figures, unemployment among Kerala's Muslims is much higher than among Hindus and Christians. In recent decades, however, the large scale migration of workers to the Gulf countries

has lifted a significant number of Muslim families above the poverty level. Foreign remittances make a substantial contribution to Kerala's economy.

HISTORY OF CONFLICT WITH HINDUS AND COLONIAL RULERS

14. (SBU) Although many believe communal relations have always been peaceful in Kerala, that is not the case. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Mappila tenants of Malabar staged armed attacks against the oppressive Hindu landlords and their British supporters, killing thousands. According to Kerala historians, the Mappila outbreaks were largely due to agrarian discontent and poverty as well as to religious fanaticism. In 1855, the British District Magistrate of Malabar at Calicut (Kozhikode) was killed by rioting Mapillas. Surprisingly, "foreign issues" have also caused communal uprising in Malabar: the "Moplah Rebellion" of 1921 was a violent uprising of Malabar Muslims against British police who tried to suppress the "Khilafat Movement," a strike against the British rulers of India demanding restoration of the Turkish Caliphate. British forces violently suppressed the rebellion, which lasted for several months.

MUSLIM POLITICAL PARTIES: COMMUNAL OVERLAP

15. (SBU) The advent of multi-party coalition politics has now ensured Muslim involvement in Kerala's political life, providing a framework for different communities to work together. The Muslim vote is a major swing factor in present day Kerala politics. Kerala is one of the few Indian states with viable, exclusive Muslim political parties. The Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), the leading Muslim party, has been allied with the Congress for over two

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decades and is part of the current UPA government at the Center. In recent years, corruption, nepotism and the sex scandals of some of its leaders has led to some erosion of IUML support, particularly among its youth cadre. Islamic hardliners and the Leftist parties constantly barrage the IUML for its links with the Congress party, which is perceived to be ineffective in supporting the Muslims of India in the face of the "Hindutva" (communal Hindu) onslaught.

16. (SBU) The Iraq situation has given the IUML's opponents one more handy weapon. The Communists and the Islamists separately attack Congress and the Muslim League for their passivity, even complicity, with regard to the U.S. actions. Most recently, the IUML General Secretary and Union Minister of State for External Affairs E.

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Ahmed's "awkward silence" against the Saddam verdict was the subject of ridicule in an editorial in the popular Muslim daily, Madhyamam.

THE MORE MILITANT PDP

17. (SBU) Of the two smaller Kerala Muslim political parties, the Indian National League and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), both of which supported the Leftist coalition in the 2006 Assembly elections, the PDP is more controversial for its alleged militancy. Abdul Nasser Madani (also spelled Madhani), the founder-leader of the PDP, has been in a Tamil Nadu prison for eight years awaiting completion of his trial for alleged complicity in the 1998 serial bombings in Coimbatore by the banned "Al-Umma." Those bombings, which included an attempt to assassinate BJP leader L.K. Advani, killed 58 persons and injured 250. Despite prosecution charges of criminal conspiracy and logistical support for the terrorist act, Madani enjoys much sympathy from Kerala Muslims. Since the bombings, Kerala police have kept close watch over PDP activities. Nonetheless, in September 2005, PDP workers allegedly high-jacked and burned a Tamil Nadu bus near Cochin, Kerala, protesting the continued incarceration of Madani.

MUSLIM RELIGIOUS GROUPS: THE POLITICAL OVERLAP

¶8. (SBU) The predominantly Sunni population of Kerala is divided along denominational lines. Leadership rivalry seems to be the prime cause of division between the two leading groups of Sunnis (the "EK Group" and the "AP Group"), although many see the AP group as "ultra conservatives." While the "EK group" is generally supportive of the IUML party, the leader of the "AP Group," Kanthapuram A.P. Aboobacker, has traditionally supported the Leftists. A third, smaller Sunni group, the Mujahids, part of a reform movement that started in Kerala in the 1920s, stands for a purer form of Islam free from syncretistic elements such as worship at the graves of saints. The Mujahids themselves split into two groups in 2002: one group seeks to emphasize the group's purist ("Salafi") ideology, the other wants to be more inclusive in outlook and to engage in social work.

¶9. (SBU) A fourth Sunni group, the Jamaate-Islami Hind Kerala (JIH), is a relatively small but influential sect of Muslims attracting the educated and politically conscious. Standing for a hardline Islamic faith-based world order, JIH routinely issues directives to its members on which parties and candidates to support in elections. Solidarity, the youth wing of the JIH, is very active in the anti-Coca Cola agitations of Kerala. Although infamous for its militant rhetoric, the JIH, per se, has no history of organizing terrorist acts.

ALLEGED TERROR LINKS OF SIMI

¶10. (SBU) The Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), banned for its alleged involvement in several terrorist acts, is in fact a breakaway group of the national JIH. Kerala police suspect that SIMI is still operating clandestinely on a small scale in Kerala, under the cover of other Muslim organizations. Wanted by the Indian police for several terrorist acts, C.A.M. Basheer, is a former President of the SIMI and a Keralite. A trained aeronautical engineer, he has been on the run since 1993. He was believed to have been operating from the Gulf countries, but now his whereabouts are unknown. Indian Police suspect him to be a key link between the Lashkar-e-Toiba and SIMI.

SECRETIVE NDF CONSISTENLY OPPOSES THE U.S.

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¶11. (SBU) One of the fastest growing, most controversial and secretive Muslim organizations in Kerala is the National Development

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Front (NDF). The NDF was formed in Malappuram, Kerala, in 1993, ostensibly to fight against human rights violations through peaceful means. However, many consider the NDF to be a cover for Islamic extremism. IUML leader and former Public Works Minister M.K. Muneer (protect) told post that the NDF may not have developed connections with major terror networks such as the Al-Qaida, but it is run by former SIMI activists and is capable of organizing smaller-scale bombings. According to Muneer, the NDF has been infiltrating the IUML party despite a party decision in 1999 to resist such moves. Muneer blamed "discredited IUML leaders" such as Treasurer and former Minister P.K. Kunjalikkutty for shielding the NDF for the leaders' own selfish interests. Baburaj (protect), a prominent local journalist based in Malappuram, pointed out the NDF is involved in most of the communal attacks that occur in North Kerala.

¶12. (SBU) The judicial commission that investigated the 2003 massacre of eight Hindus in Marad, Kozhikode exposed the NDF and IUML workers' active involvement in the planning and execution of the crime. More recently, six members of an "NDF hit team" were sentenced to life imprisonment for hacking to death a Communist worker who allegedly molested a Muslim girl at Nadapuram near Kozhikode in 2001.

¶13. (SBU) The NDF has consistently opposed U.S. Mission activities in Kozhikode: In August 2006 against an outreach exhibit program of the American Library (ref A); in September 2004 against a visit of Consulate officials, falsely accusing them of planning to "hijack a cultural center;" in December 2003 against a Consulate Public Affairs Seminar on "Islam and Women."

POLICE CHIEF SKEPTICAL OF NDF BONAFIDES

¶14. (SBU) Kozhikode Police Commissioner Balram Upadhyay (protect) told Post that the NDF "seems to be spending a lot of money," saying he has no idea of its sources. With millions of Keralites working in the Middle East and elsewhere, and billions flowing in through official channels and "hawala" (unofficial money channels), the Police Commissioner said it is difficult to monitor all external links of Kerala. When asked about former Police Commissioner Neena Rawat's reported deposition before a judicial commission in 2005 that NDF had sourced funds from Iran and Pakistan, Upadhyay said: "I cannot deny that the NDF has foreign connections and money sources."

Journalist Baburaj pointed out that the NDF had enough money to quickly launch four editions of its newspaper "Thejas" at a time when even established newspaper houses are struggling financially.

MODERATING FACTORS STILL AT WORK, BUT LOSING APPEAL

¶15. (SBU) According to Hussein Madavoore (protect), a prominent Muslim leader of the Mujahid faction, moderating factors are still at work in Kerala. None of the prominent religious groups encourage radicalization. Even the AP Sunni Group which, according to Madavoore had resorted to some religious killings in the past, has stepped back having seen the negative reactions from Kerala society. He believes that the NDF is not capable of organizing large terror strikes, although he conceded that "a few people are enough to cause trouble."

¶16. (SBU) Journalist Baburaj believes communal relations in Kerala have become more precarious because there are no credible Muslim leaders to restrain passions. Muslim religious/political leaders such as Panakkad Shihab Thangal, once unquestioned, are gradually losing their appeal because of the increasing unpopularity of the IUML. "In this situation, if a divisive issue comes to the fore, it could just get out of control," Baburaj said.

SECURITY IMPLICATIONS FOR USG PROGRAMS

¶17. (SBU) All interlocutors pointed out that widespread opposition to U.S. policies prevail in North Kerala. The various newspapers of the area, the Madhyamam newspaper of the Jamaate Islami, Thejas of NDF, Siraj of the AP Sunni faction, Varthamanam of the Mujahids, Chandrika of the Indian Union Muslim League, have contributed much

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to creating this environment. Hussein Madavoore pointed out that because of the perceived religious overtones many local Muslims attach to global anti-terror campaign, no Muslim leaders who publicly support U.S. government programs could survive in their positions. Given these circumstances, U.S. programs in North Kerala, even if non-political, will most likely attract protest demonstrations.

¶18. (SBU) "One cannot rule out demonstrations in a democracy," said Police Commissioner Upadhyay (protect) adding that "chances of trouble also cannot be totally ruled out." According to him, however, with reasonable precautions, U.S. visitors should have no problem in North Kerala. He requested to be informed in advance of any U.S. programs in order to ensure better security coordination.

BETTER MONITORING AND SECURITY COORDINATION NEEDED

¶19. (SBU) COMMENT: Frederick Forsyth's description of Kerala as a

"receptive territory for Islamist extremism" in his latest bestseller "Afghan," recently focused public attention on the hardline groups that have emerged in the state. In Kerala, Forsyth's view was widely criticized as alarmist and exaggerated. Kerala society traditionally has strongly disapproved violent ideologies while favoring their associated democratic expressions. For example, the Naxalite violence prevalent in some other parts of India has no public support in Kerala, whereas the democratic expressions of the "communism" of the CPI(M) and the CPI enjoy wide support. Violence is unlikely to find support from Kerala's traditional Islamic community, either. However, given the large scale unemployment and the "siege mentality" that some sections of the Islamic media seek to spread, we endorse the recommendation that the activities of suspect organizations among Keralite youth and the use of "hawala" money transactions need to be better monitored. We also recommend that U.S. Mission programs in North Kerala seek adequate security from the helpful local police. END COMMENT

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